



The Organization and Problems of University Libraries in Italy

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FOR THE FOREIGNER, who has no direct knowledge of or experience with Italian libraries, it is necessary, first of all, to describe them as they are.

On the one hand there are the public governmental libraries, that is, those which are administered as national institutions directly by the state [national government]. On the other hand there are the libraries of the local governmental authorities, whether they be the municipalities or the provinces, over which the national government also exercises a certain measure of control, for the most part on a regional basis, by means of the bibliographical superintendents who report to the Directorate-General of Libraries. The public governmental libraries are divided into two large categories: (a) independent libraries, and (b) libraries which "serve as an aid to other institutions," as established by the still effective Royal decree of October 24, 1907."¹

It is important to explain the term independent as attributed to the libraries of the first category. This term is not meant in the sense of their enjoying an independence of operation (they are, actually, dependent on the national government through the Ministry of Public Instruction, Directorate-General of Libraries), but in the sense, as differentiated from the university libraries, of their not having any ties to or complementary relationships with other institutions. The principal of these *biblioteche autonome* are the "national" libraries of Rome, Florence, Milan, Venice, Naples, Bari, Palermo, the libraries of such smaller communities as Cremona, Parma, Gorizia and Lucca, and the historical libraries of Rome and Florence such as the Angelica, the Casanatense, the Medicea-Laurenziana, and the Marucelliana.

The university libraries include, or rather they themselves make

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up, the category of those which "serve as an aid to other institutions," that is, the universities; they are, in other words, also state, or public libraries, but they differ from the others according to the law of 1907, in that they (a) offer to students the necessary assistance for those studies which are being completed at the university to which the library is related, and (b) they provide for the professors research facilities appropriate to the subjects being taught.²

The cities having this type of university library are, in alphabetical order: Bologna, Cagliari, Catania, Genoa, Messina, Modena, Naples, Padua, Pavia, Pisa, Rome, and Sassari. In addition, the state library of Turin is called a "national" university library. All the staff for these libraries (librarians, assistant-librarians, and minor employees) as well as for the *biblioteche autonome* is recruited through competitions on a national scale, which take place in Rome. The directors of libraries are appointed by the Ministry.

Naturally, both in those places where a public university library exists and in such cities as Milan, Florence, and Trieste where one does not exist, the universities have their own faculty and institute libraries administered by the university itself. Their function is regulated by the Royal decree of April 1, 1909, which distinguishes these "special" libraries as independent from the local public, or state, university libraries. They must observe certain fundamental rules just as the state public libraries must, especially with regard to their holdings and cataloging.

The law of 1907, already referred to, regulates in detail the relationships between the universities themselves and the state, or public, university libraries. It provides for a permanent Commission, composed of the Rector of the university, the director of the library, and a professor delegated from year to year from each faculty. The Commission is required to deliberate about the acquisition of books, the selection of periodicals, publications to be sponsored by the library, requests for special funds from the Ministry, hours of opening, and other important matters. With respect to the funds appropriated to the library by the Ministry, the Commission is responsible for six-tenths of the appropriation marked for the acquisition of books, while the other four-tenths must be put to use by the director of the library.

These conditions are, for all practical purposes, no longer in effect today. Their lapse was accented after the Second World War when the strictures on the funds assigned by the Ministry to the public university libraries did not permit their sharing them with the special

libraries; in fact, the reverse phenomenon took place, wherein the universities in many cases gave financial assistance to the general libraries for the acquisition of books and periodicals.

Two fundamentally important developments occurred after the Second World War: (1) the enormous expansion in book production and (2) the rising specialization in university studies which, to some, seems to lessen the present need for a general university library, which cannot avoid lagging behind book production in every field of knowledge; a situation which, to some, indicates the importance of strengthening the faculty and institute libraries which are better prepared to keep up with the work in specific subject areas.

It is no wonder, therefore, that Italian librarians in recent years, in the Italian Library Association (*Associazione Italiana per le Biblioteche*, A.I.B.), have attentively discussed these problems, and in particular the problem of the responsibilities to be assigned to the university libraries and the relations between them and the special libraries.

The subject figured in the agenda of the Congress of Asti, in 1949, which can be said to have been the first after the war. In that Congress two distinct and opposing tendencies were marked. One, the minority, proposed the pure and simple separation of the university libraries from the universities and their transfer to the status of independent state libraries. (In support of this point of view, the fact was noted that in the great majority of the cities which are the seats of a university library that library represents the only existing governmental public library.) Their functions in serving the universities would be assumed by the faculty and institute libraries, and these would be directed by a chief librarian who would be nominated by the University Rector and be dependent on his instructions.

Opposed to this was the more prevalent movement, by far, which recognized the chance to save for the university libraries their traditional character by intensifying and stating more precisely their relations with the universities. The agenda approved by the large majority favored the centralization in the general library of copies of all the catalogs existing in the university, coordination of acquisitions, and the overseeing of the technical functions of the specialized libraries.³

The same subject, with a more rigorous scrutiny of various aspects of the problem, was treated at the Congress of Cesena in 1954. Special

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notice was made, in particular, of the fact that "the University Library, far from being an arbitrary and casual creation, responded to a profound and real need of the significant cultural life of the University: a need still felt today for the continuity of cultural unity which can hardly be derogated from the needs of modern specialization." This was confirmed by the fact that "also . . . in areas where there was no University Library initially, the academic authorities wanted to have a central library system established, having the function . . . of assuring coordination among the special libraries of the Faculties, Institutes and Seminaries."⁴

It was also hoped that the personnel employed by these special libraries would be recruited in a manner to insure their possession of an adequate professional preparation, and also that the director of the university library would be in charge of overseeing the libraries with respect to cataloging, the arranging of the collections, and the maintenance and modernization of the holdings and the catalogs. Furthermore, it was hoped that the establishment of specific conventions between the universities and the university libraries would provide means for collaboration on financial aid as well.

So, a decade has elapsed since the last discussion in Italian library conventions on such fundamental problems, which are common to every other civilized nation (in Germany, for example, there has been, since 1955, a regulation about the relations between general and special libraries). In Italy, nevertheless, the necessity for resolving these problems is more vital and pressing than elsewhere because of the particular character of the Italian universities which are at one and the same time, although this may seem to be contradictory, more centralized and more autonomous than those of most other countries.

They are, in fact, less free as regards their dependence on subsidies and the matter of state intervention; on the other hand, professors in Italy tend to act individually, each within his own sphere of influence, whence the marked individualistic character which distinguishes the universities. From this situation there arise grave difficulties for the libraries, so intimately tied are they to the life of university studies, with particularly negative consequences for cooperation and coordination.

And it is precisely this lack and insufficiency of cooperation and coordination among libraries in the university world which is most apparent to the foreign observer and visitor, such as Robert Vosper, who was a visiting librarian in 1960, and Arthur T. Hamlin (1962),

directors of the university libraries of California (Los Angeles) and of Cincinnati, respectively. Their writings⁵ reflect, by way of contrast, the very different situation which exists in the United States, where the general university libraries depend on the universities and not on the state, where the funds allocated to these libraries are infinitely greater and, above all, where the spirit of cooperation among libraries is different and the relationship between libraries and readers is more open and direct.

To the foreign observer, the Italian situation appears, in the words of Vosper, as "a great variety of jealously autonomous, uncoordinated, and selfishly parochial faculty and institute libraries." In their observations, even the state university libraries, with their limitations and their obstacles (administration separated from the university, scarcity of money and of personnel, restricted hours of opening, malfunctioning of old buildings) present positive characteristics such as the advantages of a uniform and controlled organization which allows them to be neatly separated from the "jungle" of the small faculty and institute libraries.

The libraries of these faculties and institutes are, in fact, reserved for the use of the professors and their immediate colleagues; the books and periodicals are often kept in locked cases; borrowing, hours of opening, and in general, access to and the use of the collections are limited. Book selection is made by one of the professors according to personal criteria. The selector often ignores the situation of the neighboring libraries, even of the same faculty, which results in the duplication of numerous acquisitions. Usually, the employees of these special libraries do not have the time or the bibliographical competence necessary for the correct cataloging of the books; often, the holdings of these individual institute libraries do not appear in any general catalog.

For Hamlin, the principal stumbling blocks consist in the excessive splitting up of these libraries, in the lack of adequately instructed personnel, and in the slight spirit of cooperation. To remedy these defects, Hamlin, looking at the type of library prevalent in the universities of his own country, recommends that in each university there be a central library with precise functions and responsibilities, principally the organizing and keeping up to date of a general catalog of all the book material existing in the university, the function of carrying out book acquisitions on behalf of all the faculty and institute libraries with the funds provided, the authority to reject duplicate ac-

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quisitions and to report such duplications to the Rector or to the administrative authority, and the responsibility for creating in the central library adequate bibliographical tools, collections of official publications, and all such general works which could not be acquired by the individual institute libraries.

Against these criticisms and recommendations, which have found widespread agreement among both Italian and foreign librarians as well as some Italian university professors, a majority of our professors have set forth the fundamental objection that the state, or public, libraries, defined as "university," do not fulfill the aims set for themselves by the universities, which are educational and scientific. In fact, according to one eminent professor of the University of Rome⁶ in his recent argument against Vosper, they can be defined as "a hybrid between the modern library and the antiquarian library."

According to this point of view, the state university libraries can best furnish the most important reference books, good collections of texts, and large collections of periodicals; but they cannot provide the specialized means necessary for research. It is from this that the need for special libraries has developed, even though there have been some inevitable difficulties—those of an insufficient preparation of personnel and a certain wastefulness of resources due to duplication of acquisitions; yet this point of view also maintains that such libraries have a fundamental relationship to the needs of teaching and research which the general libraries cannot provide.

The same professor, furthermore, has declared himself quite skeptical about the chief remedy suggested by Vosper, and now again by Hamlin, the concentration and the centralization of the libraries, arguing that the university teacher needs the library itself as an immediate instrument of work, and cannot depend on a much larger organization which would fatally impede or limit the use of this instrument.

Also, cooperation among libraries to eliminate the acquisition of duplicates would be, from this point of view, little welcome in that certain works are indispensable to the aims of research and cannot be fought over by those engaged in research. These arguments are, in sum, the vindication of the "special library" and of the "institute library" as a unit of specialized knowledge and are proposed in opposition to the other argument which is directed to overcoming fragmentation and the particularism of small library collections.

A recent law (November 3, 1961) has examined the question of the

personnel employed by the faculty and institute libraries. These institutes are not staffed, to begin with, by employees who have a competence in specific subject matter; the bibliographical and library functions are performed by university employees who have no systematic preparation and who are often shifted from one office to another.

The law now institutes a national staff roster of 45 librarians, that is, personnel who have a degree, and a roster of 250 assistant librarians, who have a high school diploma. However, a serious limitation to the utility of this provision is, according to some,⁷ constituted by the fact that the direction of such personnel is given to a faculty professor and not a librarian. The professor, in fact, is already burdened with his own research and teaching, and cannot give to the library the continual attention and competence that a professional librarian could.

These recent objections to such a useful and needed legislative measure also demonstrate and confirm the extreme complexity of the problems treated in the present paper. In it, rather than express personal opinions and proposals, the aim has been to delineate the principal aspects of the problems themselves and to show how these problems are considered and discussed by Italian librarians at their conventions and in their journals. In conclusion, it is not difficult to foresee that the eventual solution of these questions must take into account the following fundamental points: (1) Will the public university libraries continue to depend on the state or will they become dependent on the universities? (2) In case they remain dependent on the state, will they continue to develop their function as "libraries of assistance" to the universities, or is it advisable that they be transformed into autonomous state libraries, without ties to the universities? (3) If they remain dependent on the state, can they continue to develop their actual functions in a way that will permit a better and more organic collaboration with the universities? (4) If, instead, the libraries in question are separated from the universities, becoming totally autonomous, must the university institute a proper central library or must the faculty and institute libraries be made better and more functional? (5) If the state university libraries pass over to the universities with the functions of central libraries, how must the regulation of cooperation between the central and the special libraries be implemented?

As said above, these problems are common to the principal countries endowed with a complex university and library structure. In Italy

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the necessity for resolving these problems is felt more acutely than elsewhere because of the burdens which have come about as a result of a too fragmented and specialized structure.

Above all, we must not conceal the difficulties of arriving at a solution; the recent counter-criticisms by the university professors are a proof of this. But substantial progress can be achieved if it is recognized by everyone that, as things now stand, the one step to be taken before all others must be a strengthening of the spirit of collaboration and of cooperation.⁸

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The article by Hamlin will be published shortly in an important Italian Library review. It is entitled, in the original manuscript, "The Libraries of the Universities of Italy: a Study of their Services and Collections." Mention should also be made of Hamlin's article in Italian: "Impressioni sulle biblioteche universitarie italiane," published in the illustrated review *Pavia*, May-August 1962.

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8. A relevant group of recent articles, by Robert Vosper and others dealing with matters discussed in this paper was published as *Convegno di Studi sulle Biblioteche Universitarie* (Pubblicazioni della Soprintendenza Bibliografica per la Campania e la Calabria, No. 8.) Napoli, 1962. Another group appeared in *Studi Economici* (Università di Napoli), 15, no. 2-3, March-June 1960.